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News From Nowhere

Television and the News.
By Edward Jay Epstein.
321 pp. New York:
Random House. $7.95.

By HERBERT J. GANS

Americans now get most of their national and international news from television, but of the thousands of newsworthy events taking place in the world every day, only a handful can be shown on a half-hour program. How TV journalists select what is to be shown thus determines what the public learns, and there are at least three theories about their selection procedures. The official journalistic theory is that events are selected by their importance. Another theory, popular with the White House before the Watergate scandal, proposes that events are chosen mainly to satisfy the allegedly leftist bias of the TV journalists. A third theory, favored by social scientists, is that network priorities encourage journalists to select those events that can be covered most easily and cheaply and that will attract a large audience.

This theory is developed more fully by Edward Jay Epstein in his new book, a study based on observations among and interviews with TV journalists in 1968 and 1969, particularly at N.B.C. News. Since funds are limited, the entire panoply of national news must be covered by a small number of camera crews (10 during his study but more now), and the events most often chosen for filming are those most accessible to the camera crews. Domestic news thus comes largely out of Washington, New York, Chicago and a few other urban centers, and much of it reports what Epstein calls anticipated events, such as news conferences.

Epstein shows that in order to attract and hold the audience, network news must emphasize dramatic events which depict exciting visual action. The TV journalists are further limited by network policy, such as that regulating the coverage of race riots, and by the F.C.C. fairness doctrine, which requires them to present "both sides" of a controversial issue whatever the conclusion of their own fact-finding. Epstein concludes that TV journalists are so beset with technical and corporate requirements that

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they have little opportunity to select news according to their own values.

Having myself observed at N.B.C. and C.B.S. News, I find Epstein's analysis penetratingly accurate, except that it sometimes overestimates the extent to which budget controls and network policy dominate the TV journalists. While explicit values rarely creep into the news, implicit ones do so all the time. At the time of Epstein's study, TV journalists referred to the People's Republic of China as Red China, but they never thought to call Chiang Kai-shek's island Totalitarian Taiwan.

My main disagreement with Epstein's book, however, is about the policy implications of its findings. Epstein devotes only a couple of pages to them, arguing that opportunities for changing network news are severely limited and that alternative sources of news—on local stations, public television and in the print media—should be explored. Not only does he forget that these media are inhibited by similar organizational priorities, but he fails to consider other possibilities for change. For example, if the fairness doctrine were revised to require news programs to devote more time and film to the activities of the majority of Americans who cannot hold news conferences, TV news would not concentrate on stories about "elite news makers" to the exclusion of the rest of society as much as it does now.

Actually, Epstein finds less fault with the organizational setup than with the TV journalists. His anecdotal reports of their activities tell mainly about their digressions from network policy, such as their occasional staging of news events. He never mentions how hard they work, for example, in looking for scoops even though they lack the time for investigative reporting.

Epstein also seems unworried about the social and political implications of his findings, notably the over-selection of action-packed events, which, while hardly limited to TV news, does give viewers an exaggerated version of reality. Although there is some evidence that on domestic matters, at least, their opinions are not shaped by what they see on the TV news, I would argue that the news media should report more of the typical but undramatic events so as to give their audiences a more realistic picture of American society. Epstein dismisses this argument as the social science critique of the news, but in this instance, the social scientists may just be on the right track. ■